MARYLAND

DEPARTMENT OF DISABILITIES

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MAPPING MONTGOMERY ACCESSIBILITY PILOT PROJECT IDENTIFIES AND RATES BUSINESSES

BALTIMORE, MD (March 23, 2012) – Montgomery County government, Independence Now and the Maryland Department of Disabilities (MDOD) have joined together for "Mapping Montgomery," a pilot project that will allow people with disabilities and their families to identify and rate the accessibility of local businesses.

"People with disabilities have long endured unpredictable results in accessing restaurants, retail establishments and other public accommodations," Catherine A. Raggio, MDOD Secretary. "If they haven't visited the business before, they need to call to find out whether there are barriers such as stairs or other impediments to accessibility.   It can be a time-consuming process."

The Mapping Montgomery project is the result of conversations Delegate Bonnie Cullison had with Uma Ahluwalia, Director, Montgomery County Department of Health and Human Services and Secretary Raggio on the difficulties people with disabilities face when choosing a restaurant, bank or other business. Rather than taking a legislative approach, they identified a more consumer-focused approach to the problem – Mapping Montgomery, an online rating system.

Mapping Montgomery is part of a global accessibility map, an easy-to-use consumer review tool that uses a five star rating system similar in concept to consumer reviews found on many travel websites, but with a focus on accessibility features. As part of the Mapping Montgomery project, people with disabilities and their immediate family members will use their computer, iPhone, iPad, Blackberry Torch or Smartphone with Android 2.2 to rate the accessibility of places of public accommodations in Montgomery County.   Mapping Montgomery volunteers will send information on various accessibility features to the Global Accessibility Map online ratings tool designed by the Rick Hansen Foundation.

"In collaborating with Delegate Cullison and Secretary Raggio, we all concluded that Montgomery County would be an ideal jurisdiction to pilot this application. Our residents are extremely savvy when it comes to using information technology," said Ms. Ahluwalia. "We are confident that we will have many residents eager to try this leading-edge technology to help people with disabilities be better informed about accessible public places and to educate businesses regarding the accessibility needs of individuals with a range of disabilities."

"Nationally, people with disabilities, their friends, families and associates control approximately $220 billion in discretionary income each year, a major segment of the marketplace" said Trish Gallalee, Chair, Montgomery County Commission on People with Disabilities. "We believe this pilot project will allow us to not only rate the accessibility of Montgomery County restaurants, stores and other places of public accommodations, it will also help County businesses increase their accessibility and capitalize on new market opportunities."

As part of the Mapping Montgomery project, the Mid-Atlantic ADA Center, one of ten regional ADA Centers that comprises the ADA National Network, will serve as a resource for Montgomery County businesses looking for information and assistance on ways to make their locations and services more accessible to individuals with disabilities. Studies have found that businesses that understand and support accessibility have a tremendous advantage over other businesses. Providing access to people with disabilities also increases foot traffic by attracting other portions of the population such as senior citizens, parents with small children in strollers and people with temporary injuries. By attracting a larger customer base, businesses are increasing their market share and profitability.

Individuals with disabilities and immediate family members interested in volunteering to be a part of the Mapping Montgomery pilot project should contact Anne Blackfield, Director, Maryland Technology Assistance Program, at the Maryland Department of Disabilities. She can be reached by calling 1-800-832-4827 / 1-866-881-4788(TTY) or by sending an email to ablackfield@mdtap.org. The project is open to persons with mobility, auditory or visual disabilities and or their immediate family members; willing to visit and review at least five establishments in Montgomery County; and have access to a computer with an internet connection or an iPhone, iPad, Blackberry Torch or Smartphone with Android 2.2 or higher on the Opera Mobile browser.

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